

Dorje's Holiday at the Gyenso Khang



a Lama Mani book

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In the hilly areas of Mundgod in Karnataka, is the Tibetan refugee camp of Doeguling. One summer, Dorje accompanies his grandfather to Mundgod. At Doeguling, while Popo-la looks for his friend, Dorje explores the old age home and finds a few surprises.

Written with the intent to introduce children to life in exile, this book takes the reader to the first Tibetan old age home in India, set up at the Doeguling refugee camp, Mundgod.

*We dedicate this book to
the memory of*

Ama Tsering Dolma

*who founded the
Tibetan Children's Village
in exile*



It was the first week of June and Dorje's school had closed for the summer vacation. His friends were away visiting their families and he was rather bored. One evening, after a day spent looking for things to amuse himself with, he sat down to dinner and was picking at his food, when his grandfather asked, 'Would you like to come with me on a trip, Dorje? For a few days?'

Dorje looked up. 'Yes!' he exclaimed before remembering to ask his parents. He quickly looked at them and they were smiling encouragingly.

'Where are we going, Popo-la?' 'To Doeguling, the Tibetan refugee camp in Mundgod, in Karnataka. I have just heard that an old friend from Tibet, Thubten, lives in the *Gyenso Khang* there. I'd like to go and see him.'

'Will we go by train?' asked Dorje.

Popo-la laughed. 'Yes, we will take the train from Delhi,' he said.

Dorje was so excited. He had travelled by train only once before and had thoroughly enjoyed the experience. The next few days seemed to drag on till finally, it was the day of their departure. At the bus station, Pa-la draped the *khata* around Popo-la and Dorje, wishing them a safe journey and return. Ama-la gave them a big bag filled with Tibetan bread and *tsampa*, and a flask filled with tea. The bus dropped them at Delhi's Majnu-ka-Tila by early morning, and in the evening, they boarded the train to Hubli.

On the train, Dorje sat by the window. He especially enjoyed looking at the fields between the stations, and stared with fascination at the electric lines that seemed to fly past them. At stations where the train would stop for a longer time, Dorje and Popo-la would get off to stretch their legs. Sometimes Popo-la bought Dorje a snack or a fruit.

As the train chugged southwards, the weather grew warmer. Finally, a day-and-a-half later, the train stopped at the Hubli station. Dorje and his popo stepped down on to the platform and found themselves amidst hoards of people milling about, some rushing to board the train,

others come to meet relatives, and *chaiwallahs* and porters going about their daily business.

They stood there for a few minutes and then Popo-la said, 'Ah, there he is!'

A tall Tibetan boy was walking briskly towards them. 'Tashi Delek,' he said. 'I am Choegyal.'

'Tashi Delek,' said Dorje looking very relieved to see a Tibetan face in the crowd. Choegyal picked up their bags and led them out of the station. 'My van is parked outside.'



They set off for the Tibetan camp in Choegyal's Tata Sumo. 'How far is Doeguling?' asked Popo-la. 'We should get there in an hour,' Choegyal replied. For sometime, they drove on the broad, smooth highway. 'This is a

good time to visit,' Choegyal said. 'In December and January there's so much dust that you have to wear masks to keep from inhaling it.'

'It's quite warm...' Popo-la murmured as he unwound the scarf that hung loosely around his neck. Choegyal laughed. 'It's not Dharamsala or Tibet, Popo-la. We are in South India!'





After about half an hour, Choegyal turned off the highway. 'Doeguling is this way, another twenty-five minutes,' he added. 'Is this a big camp?' asked Dorje. 'Not as big as Bylakuppe, but bigger than Hunsur and Kollegal. There are nine camps and we have the Drepung and Gaden *gonpas*,' replied Choegyal, with evident pride. Drepung and Gaden are two of the three main monasteries for Tibetans. Sera, the third one is in Bylakuppe.



'Do you have a place to stay, Popo-la?' asked Choegyal.

'Yes, the Gyenso Khang has a spare room they are letting us use.'

'Dinner will be over by now at the Gyenso Khang,' said Choegyal.

'We can eat at Third Camp.'

Over a dinner of steaming hot *thukpa*, Choegyal told them that Third Camp was the centre of the camp, and that it had the office of the Chief Representative, the schools, the Men-Tsee-Khang, and the market. He dropped them at the Gyenso Khang, which was also in Third Camp. Dorje peered into the darkness. 'This doesn't look like anybody's house, Popo-la,' he said. Popo-la laughed. 'It's not a house Dorje, it's a home where many old people live.' Someone was hurrying towards the gate. 'Tashi Delek,' he was saying.

'Tashi Delek,' said Popo-la and Dorje, in greeting.



'I am Sonam,' he said as he unlocked the gate. 'I was waiting for you. Have you had dinner?' When they said yes, he went on. 'You must be tired. I'll bring you some tea. This way, this way...'

The room they were given was small but comfortable. There were two mattresses on the floor and Sonam had thoughtfully put aside a few blankets for their use. In the corner was a table on which was placed a picture of His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and a Tibetan flag. A lamp burned in front of this altar.

Sonam brought them a kettle filled with hot tea and two cups. 'We serve tea very early in the morning. You can wake this boy up and send him to the kitchen with the kettle.' Dorje glared at him. Sonam left after making sure they were comfortable and promising to meet them in the morning.

Dorje was so tired from their long journey that he fell asleep immediately. He was still sleepy when he felt Popo-la's hand on him, shaking him gently. Outside, sparrows cheeped and a dog barked. A cow mooed as if in reply.

'Have you met your friend, Popo-la?' he asked, remembering why they were here.

'Not yet, but wake up now, it's quite late.'

They heard a bell ring. 'Bring your kettle, Popo-la,' said Sonam appearing outside their door.

'It's time for butter tea. The kitchen is over there.' Dorje carried the kettle and they walked towards the kitchen. Popo-la looked around, searching the faces of the people who were slowly making their way to the kitchen with their tea kettles.

'Do you see your friend Popo-la?' asked Dorje excitedly.

'Maybe it's one of them...' replied Popo-la, still looking around at the faces of the men around him. Dorje was surprised. 'Don't you know what your friend looks like?' 'I haven't seen him in fifty years, Dorje. I may not recognise him...'



In the kitchen, a young woman filled their kettle. 'You're the visitors from Dharamsala?' she asked, smiling. 'We are looking for Popo-la's friend,' said Dorje. 'He hasn't seen him in fifty years!' She smiled kindly at Dorje and turning to Popo-la, said, 'There are a hundred and thirty people living here. I'm sure you'll find him.'





'His name is Thubten, ' Dorje went on.

'I joined only two days ago and don't know everyone yet. But Sonam should be able to help you.'

After tea, Popo-la went along with Sonam, and Dorje was left to himself. He looked around. There were four long green buildings, with large gardens in front of them. He walked towards one of the buildings, and entered. A row of rooms opened into a verandah that overlooked the garden. From one of them came the sound of a radio blaring. He peeked in and saw an old woman sitting with her rosary.

'How can you pray with that music, Momo-la?' he asked. She didn't hear him. Dorje stared at her for some time before going in. She looked at him and smiled.

'Tashi Delek.'

'Tashi Delek,' he shouted.

'No need to shout, I can hear,' said Momo-la.

He sat down on her bed and fiddled with her radio.

'Come to see your Popo or Momo?'

'My popo's friend Thubten. Do you know him?'

'Phuntsok? No, I don't think so.'

'Not Phuntsok, Thubten,' Dorje said as loudly as he could.

'No need to shout,' said Momo-la.

He heard someone call his name and ran out. It was Sonam. 'Come come, your popo is calling you. He's there,' he said, pointing towards a gate. Dorje ran in that direction. This was a different section of the Gyenso Khang, for the very old and very ill.

'Popo-la,' he shouted.

'In here, Dorje,' he heard Popo-la call out.

Dorje went inside a room that was not too different from the one they were staying in.

Popo-la was sitting on a chair next to a cot on which an old man lay. The old man raised his head a little when Dorje entered. 'Is that your grandson, Lhakpa? Come closer, boy, let me see you clearly.'

Dorje stood close to Popo-la who introduced his friend. 'This is my friend Thubten. Back in Tibet, we lived in the same village and grazed yak and goats together...for many, many years.' Dorje stared at Popo's friend. Popo-la then asked him to go and bring him his bag from their room. When he returned, Popo-la took out a packet he had carried with him from Dharamsala. In it was some *mani rilbo* that had been blessed by His Holiness. He mixed a little of it in water and offered it to Thubten to drink.

The bell rang again. 'That's the lunch bell,' said Popo's friend. 'They bring mine in here.' 'I have an idea,' said Popo-la. 'We will bring our lunch here and we'll eat together.' Someone came to help Popo-la's friend eat some thukpa while Dorje and his grandfather ate rice and

sambhar. Dorje had never tasted sambhar before. 'Ama-la doesn't make this,' he said taking tentative spoonfuls. Popo-la explained that in South India, rice was the staple food. It's a bit like thukpa isn't it?' added Popo-la, 'Instead of noodles and soup, we are eating rice and soup.' Dorje nodded in agreement.

After lunch, Popo-la and his friend talked. Mostly, Popo-la spoke of how the last fifty



years had been and Dorje listened although he had heard these stories before.

'We left as planned and walked without running into any Chinese soldiers. Along the way, my oldest sister died. Somehow we managed to reach Ladakh and we stayed there with a few other Tibetan families. Within the year, my mother died and then my father. I took my younger sister and brother and left for Dharamsala. When Sera was built in Bylakuppe, my brother decided to join the monastery. My sister shifted to a refugee camp north of Dharamsala where she still lives with her family. I set up a small restaurant and lodge in Dharamsala, which my wife helped me run. Now my son and daughter-in-law look after it. I suppose, I have been luckier than many and I am grateful for it.

Thubten was now crying. 'I wish I had left with you,' he said. 'I waited too long...'





Popo-la was crying too and Dorje, who didn't fully understand why, also felt tears well up in his eyes. Popo-la had often told him stories of the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet. His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama had escaped in 1959 and many Tibetans followed him into India. And Dorje knew too, from listening to the grown-ups at home speak, that it was quite dangerous and that many lost their lives or watched their loved ones die, trying to escape.

'Go on, Dorje. Go out and play for a while. Don't let two old men bore you,' said Popo-la. Dorje wanted to stay but he listened to his grandfather and walked out slowly. In the yard, an old *lama* was feeding a few puppies.

'Gendun Dawa, do the dogs like rice and sambhar or thukpa?' he asked. The lama laughed. 'They like momos the best.'

Dorje helped the lama feed the puppies.

'Did you also walk from Tibet?' he asked, hesitantly.

'Yes, I did,' said the lama. 'All the people staying in this home came to India by foot.'

'Come and watch me milk the cows,' called Sonam. Dorje walked with him to the farther end of the Gyenso Khang where the dairy was located. It was a large shed and the door was open. Inside, there were cows standing along in rows. They were so big that Dorje was amazed at



their size.

'They must give a lot of milk!'

'Yes, they do, if we feed them well and keep them clean and healthy. It's not an easy job, taking care of these big cows,' said Sonam.

Dorje watched him milk a cow and ducked just in time when she swished her tail and almost hit him. Everyone at the dairy laughed and Dorje ran out again. What an adventure he was having! He ran to tell Popo-la about the cows.

Popo-la was still in his friend's room sitting by his cot. His friend was asleep. Dorje played outside until the bell rang for more tea and Popo-la sent him to bring some. 'We'll be here for two or three days Dorje, is that okay?' asked Popo-la. Dorje nodded happily. There was much to explore.

The next day, after lunch, while Sonam and the others cleared up the kitchen, Dorje played outside with the puppies. Their mother came up to him to have her ears scratched and Dorje obliged happily. When she walked away, Dorje went along. He followed her as she made her way towards one of the old buildings near the dairy. These were the original rooms built over thirty years ago. No one lived here anymore and there was ivy growing on some of the doors. Dorje turned back to make sure he was not too far away from the kitchen.

The dog stopped in front of an old door where two other dogs sat, as if guarding the entrance. 'I wonder what's inside?' he thought.



Dorje walked towards the dogs. He loved dogs and they could sense it, for they wagged their tails at him. He scratched their ears and heads and they let him step inside. Dorje walked past rows and rows of old rooms, some locked, some open, and all empty. A strong musty smell clung to the walls. Suddenly Dorje felt something move behind him. He turned and thought he saw a man walk into one of the rooms. He quickly followed but the door was shut. Surely, no one could be living here! Dorje waited for a while wondering if he had imagined it. As he walked outside, the dogs wagged their tails at him again...

Sonam was calling him from the kitchen.

'Does someone live in the old buildings, Sonam-la?' asked Dorje. 'It's only Tsering,' said Sonam. 'He's a strange old man. Did you see him?'

'Why doesn't he live with the others?'

'Because he's strange, I suppose,' said Sonam before he disappeared into a busy array of kitchen chores.

The next day, Dorje woke up early and set off to explore some more. The dogs were there in their usual spot. 'Tashi Delek,' he said as he walked past them towards Tsering's room. It was bolted from the outside. As Dorje fingered the wire that held the doors together, wondering about what Sonam had said about the old man, he heard someone shouting. It was an old man hobbling quickly towards him, waving his walking stick.

'Tashi Delek, Popo-la,' said Dorje, sounding braver than he felt.

The old man didn't look strange, just angry. 'I'm not your Popo,' he said brusquely.

'Do you live here?'

'What if I did?' asked old Tsering.

'You were hiding from me yesterday?'

Tsering sighed.

'Leave me alone,' he said.

The dogs wagged their tails from the doorway and Dorje went out and sat with them. When the bell rang for tea, he had an idea. Borrowing an extra kettle from the kitchen, he brought some tea to Tsering's room and knocked.

The door wasn't locked and it opened slightly at Dorje's knock. Tsering was standing in front of an open trunk near the door. He banged the trunk shut when he saw Dorje.

'You again?' he thundered.

'I have brought some tea, Tsering-la.' said Dorje holding up the kettle and mugs.

Tsering stared at Dorje for a few seconds and pushed the door open to let the boy in.

It was an ancient room and there were two cots both piled high with clothes and other things. Much of the room was occupied by the altar on which stood photographs of the Dalai Lama and also family photographs, postcards and letters.

Tsering sat on the edge of one of the cots and Dorje sat on the edge of the other. He poured out two cups of tea and handed one to the old man. His eyes wandered to all the photographs

on the altar.

'What's your name?' asked Tsering.

'Dorje.'

'Are you here to see your grandparents?'

'Popo-la is visiting his friend and I came along. We live in Dharamsala.'

'Your Popo will be looking for you.'



Dorje took the kettle and the cups and left only to return almost immediately. He sat in the room, talking incessantly and telling Tsering about his family and school, while the old man pretended to ignore him. 'Sonam-la says there is a room for you in the new building,' said Dorje before leaving for dinner. Tsering only grunted.

The next morning Dorje was back at the old room. The door was wide open and Tsering was cleaning. There was a discarded pile on one of the cots.

When he saw Dorje with the tea kettle, he smiled broadly.

After tea, Dorje stayed to help Tsering with his cleaning and when the bell rang, he ran to the kitchen and brought their lunch. Tsering fed the dogs first before he sat down to eat.



'What's this?' asked Dorjee fingering a wooden drum like

object. 'You've never played *Sho* before?' Dorje shook his head - No. The old man pulled out an old bag from which he took out some dice, old coins, and a small round board. 'It used to be a popular game for us,' he said. 'Here, let me show you how it's played,' he said.

When they stopped playing, Tsering spoke, 'I came here to retire, tired of going from place to place. I came to this old age home thinking it would be the last stop, my final destination. When the new rooms were built, I just didn't feel like starting all over again, moving to a different place.'

'It's not far away,' said Dorje.

Tsering smiled. 'I didn't want to move again.'

'Didn't anyone ask you to go to the new room?'

'They did for a while but eventually gave up.'



By the end of the afternoon, Tsering's room had been cleared of years of junk. The lamp burned brightly in front of the altar and Tsering and Dorje looked pleased with what they had accomplished.

When Dorje went to his room that evening, Popo-la was packing their bags. 'We will leave early tomorrow. Choegyal will be here by six o'clock to take us to Hubli.'



In the morning, when Popo-la went to bid goodbye to his friend, Dorje ran towards the old building, past the dogs, to Tsering's room. Tsering was inside, packing. 'What are you doing here so early? Come to play Sho?' he asked, laughing. Dorje couldn't help thinking how much he had changed in such a short time.

'We are going back to Dharamsala now,' and looking at the bags, asked, 'Are you going somewhere too?'

Tsering smiled. 'I have decided to shift to my new room.'

They looked at each other for a while, the old man and boy. Then, digging into one of his bags, Tsering took out the packet containing the pieces of Sho and gave it to Dorje.

'*Tu je che*, Tsering-la,' said Dorje accepting the gift.

'*Tu je che*, Dorje-la,' replied Tsering clasping the boy's hands in his own.

Dorje walked slowly to the gate where Popo-la was waiting with Sonam and Choegyal.

'Where did you disappear to,' they asked. 'To say goodbye to my friend,' he said, and taking his popo's hand, walked towards the waiting Tata Sumo.



Glossary

Gyenso Khang is the old age home.

Gonpa is the Tibetan word for monastery.

Khata is the traditional Tibetan scarf, usually made of white silk, and containing the eight auspicious symbols. It is draped on important occasions, including the first day of school, while setting out on a journey, weddings and even at funerals.

Lama is the commonly used term for a monk but actually refers to someone who has reached the rank of a teacher or spiritual guide.

Men Tsee-Khang is the Tibetan medical centre that follows the Tibetan system of medicine.

Momo is Tibetan for grandmother. It's also a form of address for older women, as Momo-la, which is more respectful.

Momo is an all-time favourite dish of steamed dumplings stuffed with minced meat or vegetables. Not to be confused with grandmother!

Popo is Tibetan for grandfather. It's also a form of address for older men, as Popo-la, which is more respectful.

Tashi Delek is the traditional Tibetan greeting conveying good wishes.

Thukpa is a popular dish of broth to which noodles, meat or vegetables are added. In Tibet, it is usually made in excess at dinner and had for breakfast also. Nothing like a hot bowl of nourishing soup on a cold morning!

Tsampa is a Tibetan staple food, made with roasted barley flour and mixed with salted butter tea. In the mountains, this simple dish is very useful for its high energy content.



In 1959, when His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet sought asylum in India, tens of thousands of Tibetans followed him into exile. A year later, the State Government of Karnataka offered land for the Tibetan people and the first refugee camp in exile came up at Bylakuppe, in Mysore district. Half a century later, the Tibetan community continues to live in exile.

Think Tibet was formed as a platform for people to work together to contribute to the community in exile. One avenue that was chosen is publishing of children's books that reflect a society in exile. As a tribute to the story tellers of Tibet whose tales regaled listeners young and old, the imprint is called Lama Mani Books.

This series, Meyul, attempts to offer children a glimpse of life in an exile community. The word 'Meyul' does not find an exact translation in English but it best defines the place that is not one's home.

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The two books in the Meyul series were made possible by a team of volunteers: Usha Mukunda, Lobsang Thardoe Martsa, Aravinda Anantharaman, Tenzin Choewang, Swathi Kantamani, and Tenzin Jangchup Lingpa.

Aravinda Anantharaman was introduced to the Tibetan community in exile a decade ago, following an interview with a sweater seller. Based in Bangalore, she works with Hippocampus, an organisation that promotes reading among children.

Chime Tashi was born in exile and has grown up in the Tibetan Children's Village, Bylakuppe. The youngest of five children, it was his uncle, a monk and artist who inspired and trained him. Chime has studied the fine arts and specialised in oil painting. He hopes to use art to reach out to people and create awareness about Tibet's history, culture and tradition.

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Other titles in the **Meyul** series:

Dolma Visits the City



Lama Mani Books
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